



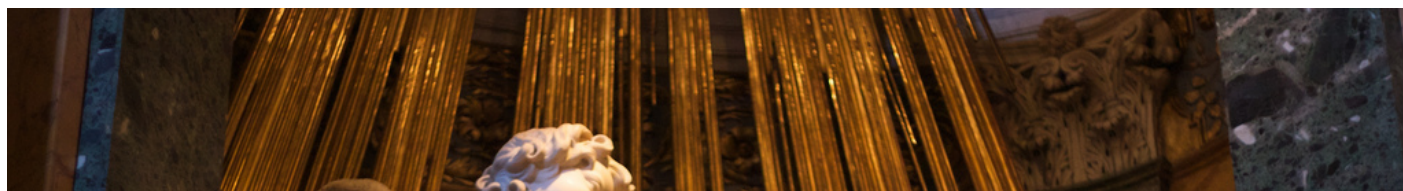
Rebuilding Catholic Culture. Restoring Catholic Tradition.



The Ascending Way of Prayer, Part I



Eric Sammons | February 11, 2016 | 16 Comments





The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa by Bernini

This is Part I of a two-part series. [Click here](#) for Part II.

Years ago I was involved in a Protestant apologetics online forum. Unlike many online forums, this one included many very bright and respectful people who expertly debated theology without rancor. Just about every viewpoint was represented: Calvinist, evangelical, liberal, conservative, even Mormon and Unitarian. I, however, was the only Catholic participant. One of the great things about being a participant was that I really had to know how to defend my faith, for making any theological statement – whether about justification or the Real Presence or morality or anything else – would result in challenges from every direction.

However, one day the topic of prayer came up. A Protestant who was friendly to Catholics noted that Catholicism really has the deepest and richest tradition of prayer, hands down. He lamented that much of Protestantism had abandoned this tradition. What surprised me was the reaction he got from the other forum participants: complete agreement. Although they couldn't agree on the basics of Christianity, and never considered Catholicism a truly legitimate option, they all readily agreed that Catholicism has developed the best “school of prayer” available.

Unfortunately, this tradition is mostly forgotten within the Church today. Your average

Catholic knows little about prayer, other than how to say the Our Father and the Hail Mary and how to ask God for some want or need. Meditation, contemplation, mystical prayer – these have become obscure ideas to today’s Catholic. Yet prayer is the lifeblood of the spiritual life. Mixing my metaphors, prayer can be compared to breathing in physical life – without constant prayer, the spiritual life will perish. For 2,000 years the Church has studied prayer, and by doing so has given her children a path to follow to grow in deeper union with God. There will be no way to escape the crisis of the Church we find ourselves in today if Catholics do not return to lives of prayer – it is the foundation for any legitimate reform of the Church.

There are many “classes” within the larger Catholic school of prayer: Benedictine, Franciscan, Ignatian, just to name a few. But most will agree that it is with the Carmelites, particularly as found in the teachings of St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, where the full flowering of the Catholic prayer tradition occurs. In studying the various treatises on prayer and the mystical life, one finds many minor variations; however, what comes into focus is a generally accepted tradition of nine “levels” of prayer the Catholic ascends in his prayer life.

Before describing the nine ascending levels, let me first mention some general terms with regard to prayer. First is the distinction between **ascetical prayer** and **mystical prayer**. Ascetical prayer emphasizes man’s *cooperation* with grace; the primary initiator of this type of prayer is man. Mystical prayer, on the other hand, is initiated by God. Man’s role is to be *receptive*. It is important to remember, however, that these two types of prayer exist at all levels; they work together and should not be held in opposition. Some levels though are primarily ascetical while others are primarily mystical.

Furthermore, the nine levels of prayer can be grouped into three “Ways”: **Purgative**, **Illuminative**, and **Unitive**. The Purgative Way is proper to beginners in the Christian life. Its goal is to tame the body, and its emphasis is on the ascetical purification of self. The Illuminative Way is the path of Infused Contemplation, in which an experiential, intuitive knowledge of God is supernaturally infused into the soul. The Illuminative Way is the beginning of mystical prayer. The third way, the Unitive Way, is proper to the “perfect.” It is the intimate union of the contemplative soul with God. Each of these ways will be explained in further detail in future articles.

Finally, between each of the three ways there is a “bridge” that marks the soul’s

advancement from one way to the next. The bridge between the Purgative Way and the

ADVANCEMENT FROM ONE WAY TO THE NEXT. THE BRIDGE BETWEEN THE PURGATIVE WAY AND THE

Illuminative Way is the Dark Night of the Senses, in which the soul is purged of all consolation of the senses. The bridge between the Illuminative Way and the Unitive Way is the Dark Night of the Soul, in which the soul is purged of all consolation of the intellect, mind and memory.

It is very important to note that there is some fluidity between these levels and the length of time a person spends in each one. Some levels one always experiences, whereas other levels are only attained over a long period of time.

With that, here are the nine levels of prayer:

Ascetical Prayer

Purgative Way

1. Vocal Prayer
2. Meditation
3. Affective Prayer
4. Acquired Recollection

Bridge: Dark Night of the Senses

Mystical Prayer

Illuminative Way

5. Infused Contemplation
6. Prayer of Quiet

Bridge: Dark Night of the Soul

Unitive Way

7. Simple Union
8. Conforming Union
9. Transforming Union

The Purgative Way

As the saying goes, one must crawl before he can walk. In the prayer life, a soul begins with those first tentative movements towards God. These movements are called the “Purgative Way,” and they also fall into the category of “ascetical prayer,” which means that the primary initiator of these levels of prayer is man. Of course, every movement towards God requires grace, but the emphasis during the Purgative Way is man’s cooperation with that grace.

Level 1: Vocal Prayer

What is the first prayer that Catholics teach their children? Usually it is something like the

Our Father, the Hail Mary or perhaps grace before meals or bedtime. In other words, vocal prayer. Vocal prayer is, simply put, prayers said out loud. Before one can meditate upon the mysteries of the faith or contemplate divine realities, he must first say his prayers out loud. Man is a body-soul composite, and therefore the body – including one's voice – must be involved in prayer. And it is important to remember that no one – I mean no one – ever abandons this level altogether. Even the greatest mystics said vocal prayers to their dying day. But over time, vocal prayer can be combined with other forms of prayer, such as meditation.

Of course, anyone can outwardly say prayers, but that does not mean that he is actually praying. For vocal prayer to be truly prayer, two components are necessary: (1) attention; and (2) devotion. A person must be aware of what he is saying, and he should be saying it with love. Our Lord cautions against vocal prayer that is said without attention and devotion when he warns, “do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words” (Matthew 6:7).

Level 2: Meditation

During meditation, one applies the mind to some supernatural truth in order to penetrate its meaning. It is primarily an act of the intellect, but the will also comes into play, since the purpose of meditation is to excite the will to love.

In general, there are three elements to meditation:

(a) *Consideration*: Think about the supernatural matter and ponder what it means. For example, one might meditate upon the Incarnation – that God became man.

(b) *Application*: Apply the truth to one's own spiritual life. If God became man, why did he do so? The Fathers said it was so that man might become like God – therefore, the purpose of the spiritual life is to become more and more conformed to the image of God.

(c) *Resolution*: Resolve practical ways to make the application of this truth occur in one's life. If the destination of man is God Himself, then what virtues do I lack to be more like God?

Meditation is the first stage of any serious prayer, and it is foundational to the further stages. It has been said that if a person meditates daily, in a short period of time he will either stop committing serious sin or will stop meditating. Meditation is also something that can be

fruitful at any level of prayer; St. Theresa of Avila said that she always started her prayer by reading some spiritual work and meditating on it. That would then lead her to other, higher levels of prayer.

Most likely, the vast majority of Catholics are familiar with the first two levels of prayer that I have reviewed, vocal prayer and meditation. After all, both levels are involved in the most common forms of prayer, such as the Rosary. Many Catholics may also have heard of higher levels of prayer such as the mystical experiences of a St. Catherine of Sienna or a St. John of the Cross. But there are actually two more levels of ascetical prayer; i.e. prayer initiated by man: Affective Prayer and Acquired Recollection.

Level 3: Affective Prayer

In the previous level of prayer, called meditation, the intellect predominates: one thinks about some supernatural truth and makes an effort to apply that truth to his life. In this third level of prayer, called “Affective Prayer,” the will begins to dominate instead of the intellect. What does this mean? Unlike meditation, where the intellect works to consider the supernatural truth, during Affective Prayer the soul receives certain consolations regarding that truth that impress upon the will. These consolations lead one to make acts of love toward the Lord. I like to think of this activity as a “supernatural New Year’s Resolution.” When making a resolution at the beginning of the year, one simply says that he will do such and such and then makes an effort to stick with it. However, in Affective Prayer, the will makes a certain resolution, aided by grace, which leads the person to make a true change in his life. For example, the soul might be meditating on the scourging at the pillar, and recognizing Christ’s suffering for our sake, might resolve to live a stricter life of penance. This resolution does not cause a sense of burden or anguish, however, but instead fills the soul with deep consolation and joy.

This level, however, can be spiritually dangerous. Now that the prayer has consolations attached to it, the person can fall into “spiritual gluttony,” desiring the consolations of the prayer for themselves. Thus, one can become stuck on this level and believe that his prayer is “fruitful” because he receives consolations. But the truth is that the only indication as to whether prayer is fruitful is whether the person is growing in virtue, charity, and self-denial. Consolations are wonderful, but they are a means to an end (which is union with God), not the end in themselves.

Level 4: Acquired Recollection

In this final level of the Purgative Way the soul is still in the domain of ascetical prayer, so

At this third level of the Purgative Way, the soul is still in the domain of ascetical prayer, so even at this fourth level, man is still the primary initiator.

This level, also called “prayer of simplicity” or “simple gaze” is the simple loving gaze upon the divine object. In it, one uses his faculties to focus on the Lord, not using the intellect or imagination or emotion. It is a simple gaze of the will.

Acquired recollection demands the greatest recollection and requires one to master his faculties of intellect and will. This is so that he can be completely focused on the Lord and be still within.

Note that Acquired Recollection should not be forced and it is not proper to all persons. If one is getting fruit from an earlier stage, there is no reason to push to this level.

Furthermore, a mother would not leave her 10-year-old daughter in an adoration chapel and just tell her, “Gaze on Jesus, not thinking of anything other than him.” She simply couldn’t do it and it could actually be harmful for her, as she would associate boredom with prayer. But there is a certain beauty about this level, as it starts to leave the domain of man and enters the domain of God: prayer is no longer only about what it does to *you*, but is more and more directed towards God.

This level of prayer reaches the limits of what man can initiate in prayer; all steps beyond this one are initiated by God. These next steps will be explored in Part II of this series.

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Hilary White • 2 years ago

I've been madly downloading Fr. Chad Ripperger's retreat talks (available on Youtube) on prayer and meditation. It's time I moved forward on this and stopped paddling in the shallow end of the world of prayer. This (at risk of contradicting my own advice) is my main goal this Lent. What else is there to do in life? I've already been an award winning pastry chef. Only the Transforming Union can really top that.

1 ^ | ▾ • Share ▸



Food_Stuff • 2 years ago

Haven't read the article yet, but it looks great. I just wanted to mention what I find useful as a first rule of prayer: you have to DO it. Or, to rip off Nike: Just Do It."

1 ^ | ▾ • Share ▸



JAS ➔ Food_Stuff • 2 years ago

A very wise beginning. Thank you!

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Connie Rossini • 2 years ago

Glad to see you back blogging, Eric! (You have probably been at it a while and I have just been too busy to come to your site.) A reader sent me a link to this post, because she saw that your definition of vocal prayer was slightly different from mine. I would define vocal prayer as set words meant especially to be prayed with others, although they can also be prayed by an individual without speaking them aloud. In that way, "vocal" need not literally mean "spoken." Nor does "mental" necessarily mean silent, but rather the prayer of the heart. As Teresa of Avila said, when vocal prayer is prayed well, it effectively blends in to mental prayer.

The other thing I disagree with is that most Catholics are familiar with meditation. I prayed the Rosary all through Catholic school and never realized that I was supposed to be pondering the mysteries rather than concentrating on the words of the Hail Mary. And I

had no idea about how to meditate on Scripture on my own. This is a huge gap in Catholic education at all levels.

Otherwise, excellently written and I'm going to share it!

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MaryMaero • 2 years ago

I am so happy to see these articles about prayer. I think many Catholics today have not had much exposure to the deeper mysteries and "levels" of prayer, although this has most probably always been true. The first levels of prayer, where we as humans use our will and our intellect, and sometimes emotions of love, are generally well known and seen and practiced. When attempts to discuss deeper levels and types of prayer begin, many people seem to shy away from the subject. For one thing, saints and others who have actually experienced deeper levels of prayer and try to write or speak about it will use different "methods" in their explanations. I have also found that they often admit that their words of attempted explanation are inadequate, and many point out that there is not one "set" way of nailing down levels or descriptions.

I think the basic idea that I have learned, from reading the experiences of saints and from my own "smaller" experiences, is that God will do as He wishes with us in our prayer lives. I know someone who was given the gift of infused contemplation before that person even converted to Catholicism. The gift was given totally out of order in any of the "levels of prayer" methods, given for a certain period of time for His purposes, and then withdrawn.

In my opinion, a deeper life of prayer is something every Catholic should fervently desire, for reasons that are so obvious I don't need to elaborate on them. Many people seem somewhat nervous whenever anything approaches what could look like "mysticism." This word should not put anyone off. God will never lead us into anything that is wrong for us, and if we ask Him to take us into whatever prayer life He wills for us, we can be assured He will do it according to His will and in the ways that will be personal and beneficial for each of us. However, if we push on things from our own human will and desires, without submitting everything to Him and waiting on Him, then we might find ourselves presented with some difficulties.

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Michael Dowd • 2 years ago

Thanks Eric. Perfect advice as we begin Lent. We must ask God to help us do what you suggest. Today's antiphon: "The Lord heard and had mercy on me; the Lord became my helper."

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Greg • 2 years ago

Eric, what would be an example of Level 4: Acquired Recollection?

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Eric Sammons → Greg • 2 years ago

I would say Adoration is an example of it But not just being at Adoration for one

I would say Adoration is an example of it, but not just being at Adoration, for one could be meditating or vocally praying or reading while at Adoration. Instead simply gazing upon the Host, not using the imagination or intellect to think of anything specific, but instead just making an act of will to love the Lord and gaze upon him in love.

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Zac Mabry • 2 years ago

This is excellent! I will be sharing this with some friends, I have been looking for a concise summary regarding prayer, something that could possibly serve as an introduction to the works of Fr. Garrigou-Lagrangé. Thank you for writing!

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St. Benedict's Thistle • 2 years ago

Thank you for this article! I look forward to reading the second one. I have printed this out and will be sharing it with my spouse. We have been looking to deepen our prayer life.

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Eric Sammons ➔ Guest • 2 years ago

I think with children you first have to witness it. We can't overestimate the value of our children seeing us pray. Then I think you do age-appropriate catechesis - teach them their vocal prayers (Our Father, Hail Mary, etc.) first and make sure that is the foundation of all prayer. This can begin from a very young age.

The Rosary is a wonderful way to teach children to pray, for it can begin just as a vocal prayer for the younger ages (under 5), then move to meditation over time. When they get to be older (i.e. teen years), then take them to adoration frequently, and introduce them to the writings of mystics like St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross.

And of course pray for them!

2 ^ | v • Share ›



douglas kraeger ➔ Eric Sammons • 2 years ago

Witness, witness, witness! Show them that you want to pray, and are always striving to pray, as perfectly as possible because the only other alternative is to implicitly give evidence that you are not striving to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. That you are implicitly telling God, "I would rather go to hell rather than put my whole heart into praying as perfectly as possible".

Witness, witness, witness! Show them that you truly have accepted the love of ALL Truth so that you MAY BE saved (2 Thes. 2:10), show them that you are honestly trying to know and believe everything that God wants everyone to know and believe (whatever that is and all of it, in a lifelong commitment)

because the only other possible action gives the impression that you are telling God,"I do not give a damn if you want me (and everyone) to know more, if you want me (and everyone) to truly accept the love of all truth so that we may be saved, and therefore to want to know everything that you want everyone to know and believe and understand the way you want it understood. I just do not care." AND then (occasionally ?) ask them "Should we be striving to pray as perfectly as possible and should we be working to believe whatever it is that God wants everyone to know and believe and

see more

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 **Connie Bessini** • Guest • 2 years ago

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